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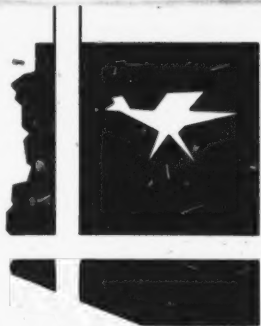
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Various approaches that teachers can use to help students interpret contemporary plays are presented in this discussion of teaching drama. Plays discussed include two from the Theater of Illusion ("Look Back in Anger," "A Raisin in the Sun"), two from the Theater of the Absurd ("Rhonoceros," "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead"), and two from Epic Theater ("Becket" and "Sergeant Musgrave's Dance"). Other plays that may be read for discussion in conjunction with those above are listed, and the availability of filmed versions is noted. (LH)

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ARIZONA ENGLISH BULLETIN

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CONTEMPORARY DRAMA IN THE ENGLISH CLASS

William Siegfried, ASU Graduate Student

A play is language, rhythm and spectacle, and a teacher does an injustice to present drama to his students as though it is permanently confined to mere pages. A teacher must help students interpret a play by using every possible device to bring the play to life.

A primary reason that makes plays difficult for students is that students sometimes fail to visualize what is taking place. This is not a problem in most other forms of prose where narrative passages aid visualization, but a play is a kind of shorthand and students need help in learning to read between the lines--to see and hear the play. This problem is magnified in teaching contemporary drama by the introduction of new dramatic forms and techniques. Contemporary plays can be brought to life in the classroom by using films, records, tapes, dramatizations, or oral interpretations. Films, records and tapes can be secured through the catalogues usually located in good public libraries. These catalogues can also be obtained through most film and record companies. Dramatizations and oral interpretations can be presented by the teacher and his students or by the members of a local dramatic group. Audio-visual aids will allow the teacher not only to bring the play to life, but to compare the play with its film counterpart, to present various interpretations of a given speech or scene, to use recorded passages of other plays which illustrate concepts being emphasized in the unit, and to present the creative efforts of students.

The study of drama should be given over to objectives and assignments which meet the objectives of the overall English course. These objectives include creative reading, thinking, listening, speaking and composition. Reading is, of course, developed through reading and interpreting plays with guidance from the teacher. Listening and speaking are developed through audio-visual aids, dramatizations, oral interpretations and discussion of the subject matter. Creative thinking is an integral part of all the other communication skills, but it is best developed through composition. Creative thinking and composition can be developed through expository writing assignments on the subject matter, but the students will probably learn more about the forms and techniques of contemporary drama if they are given the opportunity to write their own short pantomimes and plays to present in class. Students may be given the option of writing original pantomimes and plays or dramatic adaptations of short stories or scenes from novels and biographies, but they should be required to maintain consistency in dramatic form and technique. A creative atmosphere in the classroom which requires involvement in the subject matter being studied is probably the most effective method of developing a knowledge and understanding of the subject matter.

For the past eighty years, there has been a greater invention of new dramatic forms than in any previous period. These new dramatic forms have in common the rejection of the versions of dramatic reality found in conventional drama (sentimental comedies, musicals, etc.). Conventional drama, it is argued, starts and ends in appearances. It is primarily concerned with creating the illusion of reality, hence the name: Theater of Illusion. At present, contemporary drama can be roughly divided into three major dramatic forms: Theater of Illusion, Theater of the Absurd and Epic Theater. The intention in each of these dramatic forms is to break through conventions and appearances to the underlying reality. The other two major trends in contemporary drama challenged conventional drama not only because of its content but because of its form. Theater of the Absurd is characterized by plays in which verisimilitude is unimportant, in which settings are abstract representations of reality and in which dialogues are exploited in order to create new forms of language and reveal men's meaningless attempts to communicate. Theater of the Absurd goes beyond the expression of new content in

conventional form and tries to achieve a unity between its basic assumptions and the form in which these are expressed. In other words, Theater of the Absurd has renounced arguing about the absurdity of the human condition; it merely presents this absurdity in concrete stage images.

While Theater of Illusion is trying to simulate the present by pretending that the events of the play are actually taking place at the time of each performance, Epic Theater is historical in the sense that it constantly reminds the audience that they are merely getting a report of past events through songs, poetry and other theatrical devices. While external historical interest is sometimes exploited, and while opportunity is often taken of theatrical color, the center of Epic Theater is quite different; its primary concern is a definition of meaning in which the action is used as an image. Increasing numbers of contemporary playwrights are experimenting with Epic Theater because of its great dramatic potential. For this reason it may become the dominant trend in contemporary drama.

The following six plays include two of each type of theater: Theater of Illusion, Theater of the Absurd and Epic Theater. The approaches to these plays are merely suggestions intended to help the reader develop his own approaches. I have not suggested at which grade levels these plays should be taught because the reader is the best judge of his students' needs and capabilities.

John Osborne's Look Back in Anger (Bantam, 75¢) revolves around Jimmy Porter who lives in self-inflicted exile from the world. He is a university graduate and a cultural snob, but he lives in a dilapidated attic apartment in an uninspiring town in the middle of England and earns his living by running a candy stall in the market. Jimmy is dissatisfied with life and he takes it out on his wife Alison, whom he cannot forgive for her upper-middle-class background and whom he constantly torments in order to get some reaction. Alison defends herself from Jimmy by refusing to react as long as she can. And so they slowly destroy each other, under the sympathetic eye of Cliff, the third member in this strange trio. Then a fourth, Alison's actress friend Helena, arrives and soon makes the situation intolerable by her very presence. Helena sends Alison, who is expecting a baby and has not told Jimmy, home to her parents, and takes up residence with Jimmy herself at the end of the second act.

At the beginning of the third act Jimmy turns out to be settled happily with Helena, as far as he can be happy with any woman. Helena is more successful than Alison because she stands up to Jimmy.

Cliff finally leaves and Alison returns after losing her baby. Helena escapes the painful situation, and faced at last with what he is doing to Alison and himself, Jimmy backs down, and in the end he and Alison are united in their own idyllic dream world, content, perhaps, never to succeed in the real world around them.

Some people may consider this play too 'adult' for high school students, but for many high school students Jimmy Porter is a real person. They understand the peculiar quality of frustration in his anger which make such solutions as committal to a party or a cause hopelessly inaccessible to him. An obvious approach to the play is to focus on the reasons for this frustration. There is an excellent film version of Look Back in Anger with Richard Burton as Jimmy Porter, Mary Ure as Alison and Claire Bloom as Helena (available from Warner Brothers, Seven Arts, 200 Park Avenue, New York City, 10017).

The central situation in Lorraine Hansberry's A Raisin in the Sun (NAL, 75¢), is the decision of the Youngers, a Negro family, to move into a white neighborhood. The play, however, is not intended as a propaganda play. Its strength is its chief character, Walter Lee Younger, whose problem is complicated by his being a Negro but is much

more basic than that. He is a victim of the American dream which implies that success is inevitable in this country. Although Walter wants something as specific as a liquor store, his dream is for the most part unreal, a matter of pretense.

Walter's dream is destroyed on his first brush with reality and he loses the insurance money that was to pay for the liquor store. The contrast between Walter's dream and reality makes him almost as angry at his family as he is at the rich white men whose world he is unable to join. He sees his family as part of the plot to cheat him out of his mythical American heritage. Actually, his family is merely trying to persuade him to settle for the small, the possible dream before he is destroyed by the myth of inevitable success.

At the end of the play, unable to bring himself to sell the house on which his mother has made a down payment, Walter makes a speech about his family's pride to Mr. Lindner, the white man, who has come to buy out the Youngers.

The play may be approached as an examination of the race problem, as an attack on the American dream or as a portrayal of an 'angry young man'. As an examination of the race problem the play may be compared with Jean Genet's THE BLACKS (Grove, \$1.75), Edward Albee's THE DEATH OF BESSIE SMITH (NAL, 60¢), Martin B. Duberman's IN WHITE AMERICA (Houghton Mifflin, \$1.75) and Leroi Jones' DUTCHMAN (Morrow, \$1.25). Arthur Miller's DEATH OF A SALESMAN (Viking, \$1.25) is an obvious choice for comparison if A RAISIN IN THE SUN is to be approached as an attack on the American dream. An interesting comparison can be drawn between Walter Lee Younger and Jimmy Porter (LOOK BACK IN ANGER). They are both 'angry young men' and their anger is marked by a peculiar quality of frustration. Teachers might wish to use the excellent film version of A RAISIN IN THE SUN with Sidney Poitier and Claudia McNeil (available from Brandon Films, 221 W. 57th St., New York City, 10019).

Berenger of Eugene Ionesco's Rhinoceros (Grove, \$1.95) works in the production department of a firm of law publishers. He is in love with Mlle. Daisy, a fellow employee, and he has a friend named Jean. On a Sunday morning he and Jean are involved in an incident in which a few rhinos are observed charging down the main street of the town. Gradually more and more rhinos appear. They are the inhabitants of the town who have been infected by a mysterious disease which not only makes them change into rhinos but actually makes them want to turn themselves into these strong, aggressive and insensitive animals. At the end, only Berenger and Daisy remain human in the whole town, but Daisy is unable to hold out and joins all the others. Berenger is left alone the last human being, and announces that he will never capitulate.

The play conveys the absurdity of defiance as much as the absurdity of conformism, the tragedy of the individualists who cannot join the rest of society. In this context the play may be compared with Arthur Miller's THE CRUCIBLE (Bantam, 95¢), Henrik Ibsen's AN ENEMY OF THE PEOPLE (Oxford, \$2.25), John Arden's LIVE LIKE PIGS (Grove, \$1.65), Jean Anouilh's ANTIGONE (French and European, \$1.85), and Robert Bolt's A MAN FOR ALL SEASONS (Random, \$1.45).

Tom Stoppard's ROSENCRANTZ AND GUILDENSTERN ARE DEAD (Grove, 95¢) begins with Ros and Guil (nicknames of the two main characters) idly tossing coins on the road to Elsinore. The apparent suspension of the laws of probability--the coins have come up 'heads' eighty-nine times in a row--disquiets them, but like most of us they allow themselves to wander into the dangerous world of events because they are bored with their own nothingness, and because it is the easiest course of action.

It is eventually revealed that they were summoned by a messenger who came so early in the morning that they can hardly remember what he looked like or what he said. They are waiting for some indication of their mission. Their conversation reveals them as

the two sides of man--Ros is intuitive and Guil is intellectual.

Ros and Guil watch a rehearsal of the dumb show of The Murder of Gonzago, which, of course, parallels the events leading up to Hamlet's present situation. But Stoppard then adds a sequel which shows the end of HAMLET, including the execution of Ros and Guil by the English king. For the rest of the play the mood becomes more somber. Nevertheless, Stoppard seems to give his Ros and Guil more choice than Shakespeare did. They have the option of going to England with Hamlet or abandoning the mission. And even later, Stoppard permits them to read the letter which asks the English king to execute them, and presumably they could have chosen not to deliver it to him. Facing death voluntarily they realize that there must have been a point at which they could have said no, but somehow they missed it. It is a splendidly simple and pertinent truth. Most people are similarly unable to recognize this 'point', and instead allow their lives to be defined by events until it is too late to say no.

In this play Stoppard has made good capital of the fact that in Shakespeare's tragedies the major characters usually die for some moral reason, whereas the minor characters usually become swept up in the actions of the major characters and are destroyed. This is especially true in HAMLET, and it might be interesting to discuss how Stoppard developed this characteristic of HAMLET in his play and its philosophical implications in the modern world. Further comparisons between this play and HAMLET might also be rewarding. This play may be compared to Samuel Beckett's WAITING FOR GODOT (Grove, \$1.75) in many respects. The theme of waiting in the two plays is similar, and the Ros and Guil have many traits in common with Gogo and Didi (nicknames of the two main characters in WAITING FOR GODOT).

Jean Anouilh's BECKET (NAL, 60¢) is the story of a proud and independent Saxon who has become the friend and adviser of Henry II. Becket is the real power in England, and Henry recognizes it by making him Chancellor. When the old Archbishop of Canterbury dies, Henry names Becket to the post in order to have strong support in his struggle with the clergy. Becket warns him, however, that he cannot be on God's side and the King's at the same time.

As Archbishop, Becket feels that he has finally found his true role. With the vigor and zeal typical of a heroic figure, he sells his expensive clothes, gives his money to the poor and defends God's honor and His Church against the King. Forced to flee England, Becket finds sanctuary in a French monastery, but the simple life of penance and prayer is too easy for him, and he returns to England in order to continue his work. Before crossing the Channel, he has a last meeting with Henry, and they both realize that they can no longer communicate, for Becket speaks the language of religious absolutes, whereas the King speaks the language of political expediency. After returning to England the Archbishop is murdered before the altar of his cathedral. The play ends as it had begun, with Henry at Canterbury doing penance for the murder of Becket, for he needs to win the Saxons to his side. A fine film version of BECKET with Richard Burton and Peter O'Toole is available from Films, Inc., 5625 Hollywood Blvd., Hollywood, California, 90028.

It might be rewarding to compare this play with other plays dealing with religious figures such as Robert Bolt's A MAN FOR ALL SEASONS, John Osborne's LUTHER (NAL, 60¢) and Jean Anouilh's THE LARK (Hill and Wang, \$1.95), T. S. Eliot's MURDER IN THE CATHEDRAL (Harcourt and Brace, \$1.25). For contrast it might be interesting to compare these plays with Bertolt Brecht's GALILEO (Grove, \$1.45) which concerns a scientific figure in conflict with religion. Further comparisons might be made between these plays and plays such as Arthur Miller's THE CRUCIBLE, John Whiting's THE DEVILS (Hill and Wang, \$1.50), Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee's INHERIT THE WIND (Bantam, 50¢) and John Osborne's A SUBJECT OF SCANDAL AND CONCERN (Grove, \$1.45).

John Arden's SERGEANT MUSGRAVE'S DANCE (Grove, \$1.75) concerns the arrival of a group of army deserters, led by Sergeant Musgrave, in a town in northern England in the 1880's, ostensibly recruiting but actually to teach the townspeople a moral object lesson about war. In the town the soldiers are equated with strike-breakers by the striking mine workers, but a little free beer dissolves the hostility of the workers. The mine owner and his subordinates welcome the recruiting campaign as a good thing to keep the workers occupied and they even suggest a few unwanted workers as possible recruits. One of the soldiers is accidentally killed by his comrades when he tries to run away with a barmaid-whore, but when the day of the recruiting campaign comes, Musgrave is able to deliver his pacifist ideas to a sympathetic audience. Before long, Musgrave alienates his audience by revealing that one of the boxes he has brought to the town contains the remains of a local boy. While one of the soldiers holds the audience at bay with a Gatling gun Musgrave explains that the boy whose skeleton hangs before them was killed in a foreign land and in reprisals five natives were killed for him. Musgrave has decided with military logic that this five must be multiplied by five to produce the number of those in authority who must be killed in order to prove his point. At this point, Musgrave begins to lose the support of the other soldiers, one of whom had believed their mission was to end killing rather than spread it. In the confusion the dragoons arrive, the soldiers are disarmed, and the miners dance to celebrate the re-establishment of law and order, some relieved by the removal of conflict, others compelled to join in by the presence of the dragoons.

The attack on nationalism and war in this play may be compared with that in Brendan Behan's THE HOSTAGE (Grove, \$1.45) and Bertolt Brecht's MOTHER COURAGE (Grove, \$1.95). Ironically, all these plays are Epic Theater, and use their opportunities for theatrical color and action to examine the meaning of violence brought about by nationalism and war, using the action as an image.

Below is a list of modern plays available in paperback and very much worth using.

THREE COMEDIES OF AMERICAN FAMILY LIFE (Washington Square, 60¢)
THREE DRAMAS OF AMERICAN INDIVIDUALISM (Washington Square, 60¢)
THREE DRAMAS OF AMERICAN REALISM (Washington Square, 60¢)
FAMOUS PLAYS OF THE 1940's (Dell, 75¢)
FAMOUS PLAYS OF THE 1950's (Dell, 75¢)
THREE PLAYS OF EUGENE O'NEILL (Random House, \$1.65)
Delaney, Shelagh, A TASTE OF HONEY (Grove, \$1.45)
Pinter, Harold, THE CARETAKER and THE DUMB WAITER (Grove, \$1.75)
Dürrenmatt, Friedrich, THE PHYSICISTS (Grove, \$1.75)
Beckett, Samuel, ENDGAME (Grove, \$1.45)
Orton, Joe, LOOT (Grove, \$1.75)
Ionesco, Eugene, FOUR PLAYS (Grove, \$1.95)
Frisch, Max, THE FIREBUGS (Hill and Wang, \$1.50)